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ABSTRACT

School boards can have relationships to their school systems' central office that feature either democratic, administrative, or political styles of decision-making. The school board members themselves serve as active delegates for community interests, as trustees of educational tradition, or even as passive rubber stamps for the central office's professional opinions. An examination of the smooth response of the Columbus, Ohio, school system to the severe winter and fuel shortage conditions of 1977 reveals that in this particular system, exhibiting the administrative style of decision-making, the posture of the school board toward the central office did not change during a time of crisis, but was in fact maintained and intensified. (Author/PGD)

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THE POLICY ROLE OF THE SCHOOL TRUSTEE UNDER ENERGY CRISIS CONDITIONS

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Crises elicit extraordinary behaviors from people. In their individualistic human roles, they may be never so valorous, so selfless, and so tireless; or they may respond with utter terror, selfishness, and poor judgment. An interesting hypothesis is that human beings, stripped of their pretenses and fighting for survival (organizational or personal), tend to intensify and to project their most "real" selves.

One is led inescapably to wonder if generalizations may be drawn about people under severe stress who are acting primarily in their organizational roles. Specifically, this paper is concerned with the possible transformation in the decision-making process of a school board confronted with unanticipated crisis conditions. In the winter of 1977 the Columbus, Ohio, public school system faced one of the most brutal winters on record, as did a considerable portion of the United States. This situation was further complicated by a critical shortage of natural gas to heat school buildings; about 127 of 156 buildings required closure. The adaptation efforts of the Columbus Public Schools, particularly their "School without Schools," achieved national recognition as a gallant response against paralyzing odds. In effect, for three weeks (February 7-25) the system redefined the meaning of curriculum and school day and teacher role.

Curiously, very little mention of school board action and reaction was recorded in the local newspapers during those tension-

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fraught weeks in January and February. Michael Boss, et al., would hypothesize that in such a situation "a different decision-making code is likely to prevail, one more akin to 'normal' political processes."[1] Thus, whatever its original proclivity as to appropriate board roles, a particular school board might well begin to protect diversified interests, to trade advantages, and to posture publicly. In a corroborative fashion Mayer N. Zald writes: "The general proposition is that it is during the handling of major phase problems, or strategic decision points, that board power is most likely to be asserted. It is at such times, too, that basic conflicts and divisions...are likely to be pronounced."[2]

One might logically suppose that such politicization would occur despite the ideology of professionalism which suffuses most contemporary board-central office relations. At the point where an issue goes beyond legitimate professional competence, board opinions would be expected not only to surface, but to be sought actively. Since the natural gas shortage for industries and schools involved actors and arenas far beyond the usual bounds of school system transactions, analysis of the Columbus board response offered a unique opportunity to record any changes in the normal board-central office relationship which were wrought by the extraordinary circumstances. Certainly, educational expertise at the local level does not usually encompass the thickets of legislative action, public utilities' control, and Self-Help gas cooperation.

The process for attempting such an investigation consisted of accumulating data (via records, newspapers, board minutes, and interviews) which described a school board's activities during a time of crisis and of conducting in-depth interviews with individual board members concerning their perceptions of board decisions and activities before, during, and after the energy crisis.[3] The compiled data are pertinent to the school year 1976-1977.

The methodology of role-relationship analysis has, of course, strong limitations. In the first place, interviewees in a given group differ in their interpretations of events, and their dis-

torted perceptions, no matter how subtle, shade the truth. Furthermore, role analysis tends to focus attention on the individual and to ignore the constraints of the organizational structure and the demands of the environment. Finally, the intervention of time (in this case, a year) tends to blur and to soften details. However, this method does clarify some of the many faces of reality and, certainly, those under which board members are functioning. In conjunction with the other data a fairly clear picture emerges.

The first task in this project was to identify the routine posture of the board vis-á-vis its central office. The system has a seven-person board alternately elected for four-year terms in at-large biennial elections in odd-numbered years. An independent Clerk-Treasurer serves as secretary for the board and occasional ad hoc committees are utilized. Weekly meetings are held with each member acting as a liaison between the board and a particular division of the educational administration.[5] These small bits of information give a formal outline of organization but do little to capture the dynamic balance of power as it exists in Columbus. A search for such a balance in the policy process necessitates some familiarity with the current state of knowledge on public school system governance.

Of course, who governs American school systems in the tumultuous 1970's is a question which has not been resolved and which may not be resolvable in a strictly rational sense. The larger environment continually impinges and retracts: new federal laws, imposing state mandates, conflicting court decisions, strident special interest groups. The inner environment refuses to stabilize: declining enrollments, teacher militancy, reduced budgets. Legally, the local school boards govern, having been delegated the appropriate power from their respective state governments. Extralegally, the bases of power and influence are harder to identify.

How school boards govern is quite another question. While the actual relationship between a particular school board and its central office is often in a state of fluctuation, certain norms or roles have been identified as typical. For instance, Larry

Cuban classifies three ideal-types of superintendent leadership as Teacher-Scholar, Chief Administrator, and Negotiator-Statesman.[6] In like manner, board members may be spotted along a continuum ranging from "trustee" to "delegate."[7] The interaction between the board and central office (or board and community) stimulates another typology of behavior patterns: conflict avoidance and conflict management. Yet none of these styles or patterns adequately explain how a board functions---who really makes the decisions and where the power is. Furthermore, all of them posit their characteristics in times of routine and stability. (Even the expectation of conflict is now considered normal.) Probably, a necessary preliminary question is whether or not boards of education are actually functional; more researchers "seem to sympathize with the view that school boards are not in control than would argue the reverse."[9]

The literature on school-board effectiveness and relevance is replete with contradiction and ambiguity. Raymond Callahan has perceptively documented the board's checkered career from historic dominance to uneasy alliance with the contemporary superintendency.[10] An attempt to view the literature comprehensively reveals three possible patterns of board-administrative relationships useful for analysis: the democratic model, the administrative model, and the political model. All three, while in a sense evolutionary or historical, are co-existent and operative.

The democratic model emphasizes adherence to lines of legal authority, with representation as its hallmark and responsiveness as its criterion for effectiveness. Certainly, from a legal point of view, state legislatures have bestowed authority for the governance of the school systems upon the citizens of the local communities. Philosophically, this is interpreted to mean that a delicate balance exists between lay representatives and professional educators. Roald Campbell, et al., reemphasizes that "Both parties make contributions to this process [of governing] and they function most effectively when a sense of mutual trust and responsibility exists among them."[11] This model must be conceived as the "ought" condition, although from it flows the policy formation and implementation dichotomy which plagues practitioners and theoreticians

alike. Where exactly may lines be drawn between a board and its superintendent regarding appropriate rights and duties? The phrase "illusory ideal" is probably suitably descriptive in that the behavior will never mirror the rhetoric.

The largest body of literature reflects the controversies which cluster about the administrative model of school-board functioning. Expertise is the hallmark, and excellence and reliability are its indicators of effectiveness. Science management methods and control of information now often combine to elevate the expertise of the professional educator to a position of dominance in school board-central office relations. The movement, of course, has been afoot for a long time. Ellwood P. Cubberly, in his influential textbook on school administration (1916), typifies the considerable efforts of schoolmen to educate the public about the virtues of technical competence, especially considering the complexifying nature of the educative process and its administration. The question of recent decades is whether the school boards have deferred themselves into irrelevance. Beginning with the elegant case study of Norman Kerr (1963)[12] and continuing through the comprehensive work of Zeigler and Jennings (1974),[13] researchers are confirming over and over again the apparent ineffectiveness and unresponsiveness of school boards. In frustration the latter authors write: "School boards should govern or be abolished."[14] David K. Wiles and Houston Conley underscore the analysis of the diminishing role of school boards in actual decision-making by using that ultimate epithet "rubber stamp."[15] As agents of legitimation, the boards become merely buffers for the central office against increasingly incessant demands from the environment.

The third model of possible relationship is the political model. This conceptualization is as young as the field of educational politics, futuristic in outlook, and far more complex than simple advocacy for a special interest group. L. Iannaccone writes: "Educational reform must concern itself less with board responsiveness than with providing boards with the political insulation needed by them, not, however, to fend off political demands but rather to articulate these, mobilize support for them, and to

reconcile real as well as apparent inconsistencies in demands."[16] In these terms boards become "meta-mediators," controllers of the decision processes and manipulators of networks of information flowing both from their diversified constituencies and from the educational professionals. Very few boards fit this model; increased politicization among constituents indicates that it may be the most appropriate, if demanding, for the future.

Penetration of the educational decision-making system is no easy task. Zald, in writing about boards of directors for corporate and voluntary organizations, notes: "Boards of directors are hard to study. Often they conduct their business in secret; their members are busy people; the processes themselves are sometimes most effectively described by novelists."[17] This study sought first to identify the normal posture of the board in regard to the central office. Is the Columbus school board a "rubber stamp," a vestige of a by-gone era of strong lay control in the educational endeavor? Or does it function in an effective democratic manner, wielding its delegated powers in an atmosphere of trust and cooperation? Is it, by chance, a politically oriented board, overtly mediating the environmental demands in protection of its system?

The second research question involved investigation of the change in the role relationship between the board and its central office in the face of severe crisis conditions. Unusual stress encourages politicization. What happens in the wake of absolutely critical and unanticipated problems?

The results of the investigation indicate that (1) the administrative model best describes the Columbus board-central office relationship, and (2) rather than changing during the crisis, the process remained the same and was intensified.

Analysis of data and interviews indicates that the administrative model best describes the relationship of the Columbus school board and the central office over the last few years. There have been obvious and genuine attempts on the part of the board to keep the public informed, e.g., continued cooperation with the media, including public broadcast board meetings; and a telephone line to the administration for the purpose of answering

the public's questions. However, despite the effort of the board to inform its constituents, scant effort to become informed of the public's views and to represent and support those views is manifest. On the delegate-trustee continuum, this board exhibits a strong trustee position, supporting the educational expertise of the administration in policy formulation and implementation. The members regard their responsibility as one of making decisions for the uninformed public and keeping the public informed of those decisions. Typical of the administrative model, this particular board of education maintains an attitude of faith in the abilities of its educational administration, and the members feel that they are always kept informed. The board prides itself on being extremely supportive of the administration and teachers, and the members report that they have worked with the teachers' organization to eliminate incompetent teachers. They state that they have taken the time to build effective communications and trust based on, in one member's words, "fair, firm, and consistent" policies. Evidence of that trust is the policy of in-school promotions which is apparent in the school system. In addition, actions of long-time board members demonstrate their assumption that the public sustains both a faith in the administration which is similar to that of the board's as well as a faith in the board's judgment.

The Columbus school board exhibited no special concern during the crisis: board minutes indicate little more than confirmation of administrative recommendations. The members were confident of the administration's ability to cope with the situation; they viewed their responsibilities as that of monitoring the school policies and informing the public. Not only did the crisis not increase board activity, but the communications between the board and administration were perceived by some members as diminished as a result of the complete and accurate media coverage which kept the board and public informed. In fact, the cooperation of the media made possible the implementation of the formulated plan of the administration. The members were aware that for years their system had been slowly implementing energy saving ideas, and that the administration was quickly formulating

a plan relative to the energy crisis. One board member, who served as a liaison to the energy committee, was perhaps well informed and, in turn, may have informed the board; but there is no evidence to demonstrate that the board itself participated in the formulation of the plan. Individually, the members of the board appeared to have amassed and retained assorted information; however, evidence signifies that the board did not use this information to formulate policy. Furthermore, their information was not always complete or accurate. The members hold conflicting views concerning the amount of transportation and money required for "School without Schools," and at least one board member was not aware of the extensive financial help received from outside sources. These facts serve to support the use of information by the board for monitoring rather than implementation purposes.

Interestingly enough, evidence shows that the crisis conditions of 1976-1977 did not change the board-administration relationship but rather intensified the previously established relationship described by the administrative model.

The democratic model is not descriptive of this particular board-central office relationship because there is little indication of board power or shared decision-making in policy formulation matters; rather, it appears that this board has accumulated a faith and trust in its administration. Experienced school board members view interference on the part of members as "meddling" in areas that are not of their concern and attribute it to the inexperience or politics of the newer members. Partly, this faith has been due to exceptionally competent past administrators (one superintendent recently served for fifteen years during an era when superintendents were falling <u>en masse</u>; another superintendent was chosen for the post of U.S. deputy executive commissioner of education after achieving some national recognition for such successes as "School without Schools.") Examination of the Columbus school system would support an hypothesis that this school board feels comfortable in its passive role as long as it makes a "good" choice of superintendent! Sustained faith in administration may also be due to the continuity in the board existing as a result of the lengthy terms of membership on the board. One member is in

his sixth four-year term, one in his third, two in their second, and two in their first.

Despite the community support of the "School without Schools," and the use of the media by the board to keep the public informed, newspaper clippings of the latest elections imply that "credibility and communications" may be problems in the community. Interviews with the board members infer a "mutual stroking" and protection between the board and the central office. In this case, the enormous pressures of crisis, desegregation, and finance appear to have worked to insulate the board and administration from the public. At least one board member sees the administration as partially shielding the board from community irrationality, and there is a continued and strengthening movement among the board members to encourage the community to make more attempts to resolve problems at the administration level before encountering the board. (This is, in part, due to the frequent citizen use of the board meetings as public forums.)

The political model does not seem an appropriate description of this relationship. This board appears to have neither articulated public demands nor controlled or manipulated networks of information.

Analysis of this particular situation permits several hypotheses and suggests avenues for further exploration in the areas of board-central office relationships and crisis decision-making. Initially, it was expected that the crisis conditions would change the board-central office relationship and most likely would cause politicization. The factors surrounding the lack of politicization in this case are interesting to examine. Bureaucraticization increased under the crisis pressure to the extent that the entire weight of the organization was thrown behind the plan. An interesting phenomena was the influence and power exhibited during the crisis by members of all ranks as opposed to the power of vested interest groups. Perhaps politicization is characteristic of boards under normal or unusual stress, whereas crisis conditions cause more bureaucraticization and intensification of the status quo.

Another hypothesis to be investigated concerns the effect of

the nature of the crisis on relationships. Is the fact that an energy crisis is more temporary and manageable than, for example, financing and desegregation problems, influential in causing the board to be less concerned? Or is it perhaps the lack of expertise on the part of the board and community members which causes the lack of concern? What kinds of situations prompt a board to become involved? Will the board intervene or become politicized when the crisis subject concerns community values and goals, or if the problem expands beyond the normal realm of professional expertise, or perhaps if there is sufficient time for political interaction to generate? The increasing potential for educational crisis supports the value of further research in these areas.

[1]Michael Boss, Harmon Zeigler, Harvey Tucker, and L. A. Wilson II, "Professionalism, Community Structure, and Decision-making School Superintendents and Interest Groups," in Political Science and School Politics: The Princes and the Pundits, ed. by Samuel K. Gove and Frederick M. Wirt (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1976), p. 45.

[2]"The Power and Functions of Boards of Directors: A Theoretical Synthesis," American Journal of Sociology, v. 75 (July 1969), 107.

[3]The data gathering was, in part, coordinated with a comparative study being conducted by David K. Wiles--"Public School Adaptation under Winter Conditions." His analysis will be published by Lexington Books.

[4]National School Boards Association, Survey of Public Education in the Nation's Big City School Districts (Evanston: N.S.B.A., 1975), pp. 35-36.

[5]These board liaison positions include Building and Sites, Community Relations, Curriculum, Finance, and Legislation. The offices of president and vice-president complete the duty roster. Intercom--Staff Newsletter, January 28, 1977.

[6]The Urban School Superintendency: A Century and a Half of Change (Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1976), p. 15.

[7]The "trustee" stance has historically been dominant, with the individual acting in an elite and personal capacity on behalf of the general welfare. The "delegate" board member, consciously representing a particular interest group or portion of the population, tends to inject overt political overtones into the board functioning. A third middle-of-the-road designation is "politico." This kind of person shifts his stance in accord with strategic contingencies.

[8]Boards with higher socio-economic status tend to avoid conflict by deferring to administrative expertise and by placating dissidents. Boards with lower socio-economic status, having histories of tension and disagreement, tend to confront and to resolve conflict. Of course, the "trustee" and "delegate" mentalities flow with these observations, as do Cuban's classifications of Chief-Administrator and Negotiator-Statesman.

[9]"What Do We Know about School Boards?: What the Educational Research Community Has Learned about Local Goverance of Schools," n. 1975-3 (Evanston, Illinois: N.S.B.A. Research Report, 1975), p. 12.

[10]"The American Board of Education, 1789-1960," in Understanding School Boards, ed. by Peter J. Cistone (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1975), pp. 19-46.

[11]Roald F. Campbell, Edwin M. Bridges, and Raphael O. Nystrand, Introduction to Educational Administration, 5th ed.(Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1977), p. 72.

[12]"The School Board as an Agency of Legitimation," Sociology of Education, v. 38 (1964), 34-59.

[13]L. Harmon Zeigler, M. Kent Jennings, with the assistance of G. Wayne Peak, Governing American Schools (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1974).

[14]Ibid., p. 254.

[15]They specifically attribute the demise of the local board of education as a significant policy body to "reorganization to large units of representation, growing complexity of the educational task, and misinterpretation of 'local control' leading to reliance on administrative continuity, expertise, and implementation." "School Boards: Their Policy-Making Relevance," Teachers College Record, v. 75, n. 3 (February 1974), 312-313. See also Joseph Cronin, The Control of Urban Schools (New York: Free Press, 1973), p. 247, for "epitaphs" which cannot be ignored; and David Rogers, 110 Livingston Street (New York: Random House, 1968), for an articulation of the pathologies of the New York City Board of Education.

[16]Laurence Iannaccone, "School Board Research: A Synthesis and Projection," in Understanding School Boards, ed. by Cistone, pp. 261-262.

[17]Zald, op. cit., p. 110.